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ABSTRACT

A professor who teaches an American Studies course at the University of Idaho contends that she has her work cut out for her. According to the professor, Idaho's conservative political climate has led to her learning to negotiate. This paper first describes the development of an American Studies core course that began in the 1980s and continues today. She then discusses a course in American culture which was taught for the first time in 2001. The American Studies course, "Interpreting America," developed out of a National Endowment for the Humanities-funded University of Idaho workshop when William Bennett headed the agency in the 1980s and funding supported the "great ideas" tradition. In all the units of the course, she consciously includes a wide array of perspectives. However, she has mixed feelings about teaching such foundational readings as Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," a text now considered both inaccurate and culturally prejudiced. The second new course was designed as a freshman core discovery course, and naming the course and deciding on its themes were difficult enough even before the course began, since the course was envisaged as having a multicultural approach. She also describes some American Studies assignments and notes that the new freshman course has a service-learning component. (NKA)

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by Sheila Ruzycki O'Brien

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CCCC's Presentation, Denver 2001

State Politics, Students, Administrators, and Faculty: Teaching American Studies in Idaho

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Conservative state and national politics, students, and to some extent administrators and faculty shape all aspects of my American Studies courses at the University of Idaho, including texts, service learning, class dynamics, and writing assignments. As both a co-coordinator and as a professor of American Studies, I have learned to consider these conservative forces as a vital, though not always welcome, part of my community, and I have learned to negotiate. While negotiation does create difficulties for both teacher and students, some positive outcomes also have resulted.

Before I talk about political forces shaping American Studies courses, let me give you a sense of the political climate in Idaho. Just this month, a representative to the Idaho legislature from Grangeville, a town not far south from the University of Idaho's home city of Moscow (Twila Hornbeck), marshalled conservative forces in the capitol to keep the word "squaw" in Idaho place names—despite demand for the change from local tribes. She said the meaning of the term should be decided by those who use it, not by its victims—and she says that "squaw" is not an offensive word. A representative from St. Maries (Dick Harwood), a town to our north, not only supported the maintenance of the word "squaw," but also defended his use of the phrase "Jew 'em down," claiming it was a compliment to the Jews, since they are "sharp bargainers."

The House speaker in Boise (Bruce Newcomb) said he'd also used the phrase as positive. Our own representative from Moscow (Gary Young), says that farm workers shouldn't get minimum wage because many of them don't deserve it. Of course Idaho also has representative who are critical of such thinking, but racist ideas are too often accepted. What this means is that those of us who teach courses such as American Studies and composition courses with an American culture focus—and in my experience, everyone who does so has a multi-cultural focus—all have our work cut out for us. This work is often rewarding, but can be frustrating as well.

I've split my talk into two sections: First, I'll talk about the development of an American Studies core course that began in the late 80s and continues today; then, I'll talk about a course in American culture being taught for the first time this year.

Part 1: Political forces that shaped "Interpreting America"

The history of the American Studies core course I teach called "Interpreting America" has substantially shaped its present structure. The course developed out of an NEH-funded University of Idaho workshop during William Bennet's presidency in the 1980s, when funding supported the great ideas tradition. I came to the University just after the American Studies program received this grant, so I was not part of its construction, but those who were said that the grant promised that the program planned to create a course that would stress traditional foundation documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. While this was done with the politics of the NEH in mind, for Idaho, this approach made sense. I know from experience that the conservative leaning of the Idaho student body makes texts with a clear liberal contemporary agenda such a *Re-Reading America* difficult to teach from.

To these students, the tradition is a valid cultural and moral force, the absence of which excludes them from the discursive community. On the other hand, many American Studies faculty members had and have problems teaching from a conservative text such as *American Ground* because much of what we valued was excluded from its agenda. (It's largely a text of canonical male writers.) The faculty also saw an American Studies core course as an opportunity to educate Idaho students about American multiculturalism and to call into question standard interpretations of traditional texts. Obviously, then, the formation of "Interpreting America" took place amidst the on-going debate in American Studies and other fields concerning whether the traditional canon should be taught or should be deconstructed, discarded, or expanded. While those who are in favor of a canon are usually assumed to be conservative (such as Bennett) or old-fashioned liberal (such as E.D. Hirsch), it is noteworthy that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay, editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, argue strongly for considering texts within a canonical tradition; also, in a recent talk at the University of Idaho, Tony Kushner, gay playwright and activist, stressed the importance of students knowing the Western intellectual tradition so they can effectively wrestle with it. For those of us who developed Interpreting America, our strategy within the canon wars has been to continue to teach a number of highly influential, foundational texts from a variety of American cultures, often problematizing these texts, and often linking them to alternative views and contemporary issues. Our approach has thus been to challenge the dichotomies assumed in this controversy.

Along with the *Declaration of Independence*, we teach works that develop out of this tradition, such as "The Gettysburg Address" and Martin Luther King's "I Have a

Dream" speech and *El Plan de Santa Barbara*; we also teach declarations modeled on Jefferson's work, such as *The Declaration of Sentiments* and *The Black Panther Party Program and Platform*. By linking these texts, students realize that foundational documents are not dead or comfortable texts, but can be explosive with evolving implications. This result invites both conservative and liberal students into the discussion—and I think that's a good thing. Conservative students are my students, too. They are not my enemies.

In all the units of this course, I am always conscious of including a wide array of perspectives. In our "City on a Hill, City as Wasteland" unit, along with John Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity," students read Ronald Reagan's "Farewell Address," which appropriates Winthrop's terminology to celebrate the mythic America "city" that flourished under his wings. Then they analyze descriptions of actual American cities such as the South Bronx, East St. Louis, and East Los Angeles which challenge and/or exalt the "city on a hill" ideology.

Like most American Studies teachers, I have mixed feeling about offering such foundational readings as Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." This all-too-seminal interpretation of American history and character is both inaccurate and culturally prejudiced; furthermore, my colleagues and I are dismayed that many of our students *like* the "frontier thesis," finding it a convenient way to interpret America and to validate their own perspectives. Nonetheless, we have decided to include Turner's work because its ideas are so pervasive. We show how John Kennedy appropriates them in his "New Frontier" speech, while Issac Asimov uses them to promote scientific exploration. We include Native American and feminist challenges

to the "frontier thesis," as well as critiques of its role in creating a racist, sexist, and violent society. Our hope is that this "holistic" treatment of a dominant construct of American ideology will at least help students write and think about the frontier in a more complex way.

I could go on indefinitely about this course, but you see my main point—we've constructed a course that can be taught by a generally liberal faculty to a generally conservative student body. We still get resistance from students and faculty both. But we did get our funding, and discussions and learning do occur.

Part 2 The development of a Freshman only Core Discovery Course, Contemporary American Experience.

In the past few years, a number of faculty members from a variety of departments and even different colleges, have been working on changing the core curriculum at the University of Idaho. This is the first year that year-long Freshman only interdisciplinary core courses have been taught, and I've been involved in both the development and teaching of Contemporary American Experience. I was a brand new and somewhat naïve faculty member when I was working on Interpreting America, the last course I discussed—and the NEH grant that shaped our beginnings had already been written. That was 15 years ago. I knew more about Idaho politics, faculty, and students when I was helping put together Contemporary American experience.

The process of naming the course and deciding on its themes was a revealing one. Those of us developing the course knew we wanted—and the University needed—a course with a multicultural approach. We considered a title that clearly reflected this,

such as "Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation." But a number of colleagues thought this would be unwise for a number of reasons: students may not be attracted to it, and it may raise the hackles of the State Board of Education. One of my colleagues from History was particularly emphatic about not choosing such a name. When I asked her about this, she said it was because about 5 years ago, the State Board of Ed. had killed a research grant for a historian named Peter Boag at Idaho State University when they found out his research was about gays in the Northwest. Outside reviewers had given Boag's proposal one of their highest ratings, which should have guaranteed the grant, but some members of the Board did not want to fund research on homosexuality. By the way, The American Historical Association passed a resolution condemning the Idaho Board of Ed. The state board also created a furor over the documentary on teaching about homosexuality in the schools—pushing Idaho Public TV's showing of *It's Elementary* to a late hour, and making PBS run a disclaimer. You may know that Proposition —which would have banned tax dollars being used to endorse homosexuality (a bill which would have decimated libraries) came close to passing in Idaho—it went up for a vote in 1994 and 96. I'm happy to say that unlike Colorado, Idaho didn't pass the proposition because it didn't get much support from conservative Mormon voters, who didn't want the government interfering in private lives. SO—instead of raising eyebrows, we didn't call the course "Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation." It began as American Identities and is now Contemporary American Experience. Some of my colleagues insist that faculty always have control over curricular decisions; other admit they're nervous.

Sometimes, our sense of caution can go too far. In putting together a panel to go along with It's Elementary, a few of us, myself included, thought that we should include a Conservative Christian on the panel as well as a representative of mainstream Christianity and a number of gay students. We also thought we were really smart to ask someone to be a moderator. But all this didn't work. Our moderator did not moderate as aggressively as we'd hoped, and the evening focused on students in the audience—with a wide variety of opinions—each trying to prove that his or her way was the right way. Next year the panel will just be gay students talking about being gay in the U.S.

One good result occurred as a result of this contentious evening. The next class period my students expressed their frustration that the evening meeting didn't get anywhere, so I asked them to do what the panel had been assigned to do—consider the issue of teaching tolerance for homosexuality in the schools. Most of my students are moderate conservatives, but I have some students who have liberal views on this issue and some who consider homosexuality as sinful—so I told them that if they could come to a consensus in the classroom—that it could happen in the world. We focused only on consensus—I had to play the role of moderator to keep them from trying to make and win an argument, but they did a great job. In fact, after encouraging my students to take an active stance for tolerance in schools, I decided I, too, needed to talk with my daughter's school principal about the issue.

Another American Studies assignment I always do which addresses students' politics and sense of community is a "Class Constitution." In the past, I've had students be rude and disrespectful to each other because they disagreed, and so I have them work

out a code of conduct that all class members, including me, sign. Students sometimes complain about this assignment, but I think it yields tangible results.

Another component of the Freshman-only core course is service learning. I was instrumental in including an academic service learning option as part of our official proposal for the course, and my colleagues agreed to that. Yet only one of those colleagues in addition to myself—out of a total of six of us—will be including a service learning option. While I'm sure time is a factor here, as well as the newness of the course, I think politics may also be playing a role. Some students and faculty have been speaking up against service learning, calling it forced labor and expressing a fear that students would be pressed to work with liberal organizations—such as our local environmental group. Studies (by Barber, Conrad and Hedin, Batchelder and Root, among others) have shown that academic service learning not only expands students knowledge of material being taught, but also enhances a sense of citizenship and of belonging. Knowing the conservative views of most of my students, I'm now very careful to offer options—the option of a research paper (which no one chose, by the way) the option of working with the elderly or in the schools or in their churches in addition to the Environmental group option and the Food Bank option. (Some consider the Food Bank a liberal organization, since they don't require proof of poverty before giving food.) I think it interesting that the administration has been very supportive of academic service learning, but I'm sure this is largely due to the influence of our vice provost, Dene Thomas, who used to be our Director of Composition and who understands how learning occurs. Some of my colleagues in Contemporary American

Experience have told me they're waiting to see how students respond to service learning projects before atte pting to do them on their own.

So, teaching American Studies in Idaho is a challenge. Sometimes we get frustrated. Just this week, one of my colleagues in the Contemporary American Experience, who's chair of the Political Science department, said he was so flabbergasted that none of he students saw any value in Affirmative Action, that he asked them to raise a hand if they thought that Americans had any responsibility at all for negative actions that occurred in the past. One student raised a hand. He fears that providing information is not enough. A colleague who chairs the History department says she sometimes just want to yell "That's the stupidest thing I ever heard" when a student says something like the Holocaust never occurred. But she doesn't. She's an historian and she explains history. I certainly often find it difficult to be a professor and not just another opinionated person. However, we all know the delight of seeing a student gain awareness. After reading a personal narrative by Judith Ortiz Cofer on the racism she'd experienced as a Puerto Rican woman, one of my students came to class and exclaimed, "I didn't believe it. I just didn't. So I asked an Hispanic friend of mine if such things happened--and it's true!" This comment may seem naïve to the extreme—but for my Idaho student trying to understand and make sense of the world, it was a big step. And so teachers of American Studies struggle along in our complex Idaho community, dancing with a variety of agendas and trying to find a ways to teach that will resonate with students and not betray the better angels of ourselves.